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Smokejumper Obituary: Wise, Rhett Skillings (Missoula 1961)

National Smokejumper Association

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Smokejumper Obituary

Wise, Rhett Skillings (Missoula 1961)

Rhett died February 10, 2021. He was born March 10, 1940. Service in the Army and his time in Vietnam were a large part of Rhett's life.

In his words: "In October 1965 , I enlisted in the Army and graduated from the Infantry Officer course at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I served in Vietnam from 28 February 1967 to 5 April 1968. I served in the 9th Infantry Division as part of the Army/Navy Riverine Force on the waterways of the Mekong Delta. Much of the time we berthed on troop ships on the rivers and made assault landings in old WWII landing boats - regretfully many times at low tide. I was a rifle platoon leader for almost 10 months, then Executive Officer and later Acting Company Commander. My company command time came when my captain went on R&R during a time that coincided with the 1968 TET offensive, when we fought in one provincial capital city."

Rhett didn't speak a lot about his experiences in Vietnam, but he did say that on one expedition, 102 men went in, and 69 came back. Rhett was discharged 22 August 1968. Among his decorations are the Combat Infantry Badge (CIB), the Presidential Unit Citation, the Silver Star and the Bronze Star. He said that, unlike many other veterans, he never had a flashback and had no problems with PTSD. He was, however, affected by Agent Orange, and because of that seven years ago he had to start treatments for what turned out to be a persistent series of bouts with cancer.

Before the Army, Rhett was a forestry student at the University of Montana and worked summers for the U.S. Forest Service. He worked as a smokejumper and jumped at Missoula 1961-62, 69 and Anchorage 1970-71.

He then worked for the Bureau of Land Management out of Anchorage, Alaska. Brett spent 16 years in various capacities with the BLM in Anchorage, mostly in appraising. After Alaska, Rhett transferred to Phoenix and became a District Appraiser in 1985, where he appraised land for the BLM in Arizona desert country. In 1992 he became a District Appraiser for the Las Vegas District Office of the BLM.

Outwardly he was amazingly fit; he worked out regularly, until recently went for hikes, and did vigorous work outside on his land gardening, mowing, and cutting brush mostly for the pleasure of it. But when the virus weakened him, the cancer took over.

(end of excerpt)